Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War

Robert M. Gates. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 618 pp., with index.

Reviewed by Nicholas Dujmovic

CIA officers seek to understand the complicated workings of foreign governments, but the machinations of the US government are often beyond their ken or interest. I remember as a young analyst being confused by an administration's decisions but thinking that I wasn't paid to try to figure out my own government—I had enough to do following the politics of the country I was paid to follow. Of course, as I matured as an analyst, I came to appreciate that understanding the US political environment did help me do my job better.

Robert Gates's new book, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, will help analysts with the task of understanding the internal factors that affect US security policies. This, his second memoir, covers the period he served as secretary of defense in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations during 2006–2011. His earlier memoir, *From the Shadows*, provided a similar service by explicating the Cold War policies of five US presidents (Nixon through George H.W. Bush) from his perspective as a CIA officer who held policy-related positions with each of those administrations.[a]

Since *From the Shadows* was published in 1996, historians have considered it a reliable and insightful account of that period, and professors at many universities make it required reading for their students. *Duty* is also good history, and it probably will meet and perhaps exceed the earlier book's success.

Gates makes pointed and unvarnished observations about how defense policies were formulated (or undermined) by officials in the two administrations he served, by competing interests in Congress, and by senior uniformed officers. However, he also writes, often with humor and insight, on matters of specific interest to intelligence officers.

In a section devoted to his 2006 Senate confirmation hearings for his appointment as secretary of defense, Gates reflected on his three previous such experiences—for CIA deputy director in 1986 ("a walk in the park"); for CIA director in 1987 (he withdrew because of the Iran-Contra controversy); and for CIA director in 1991 ("protracted and rough"—an understatement in my view). (11–21) His 2006 confirmation, by a vote of 95-2, was more the "walk in the park" variety not so much because of his experience but because of who he was not (his unpopular predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld). Even as a former director of central intelligence (DCI) with access to the "crown jewels" of US secrets, Gates was amused that he still had to fill out the Standard Form 86 (National Security Questionnaire) for his background check and was obliged to provide a urine sample.

Gates makes a telling remark early on, saying "one of the best decisions" he made was to walk into the Pentagon by himself, (22) with no accompanying staff or even a single personal assistant. "I had often seen," he relates, "the immensely negative impact on organizations and morale when a new boss showed up with a personal retinue. It always had the earmarks of a hostile takeover and created resentment." In raising the subject, Gates implicitly is referring to periods in CIA's history when a new director did just that—Gates had been an executive assistant to Admiral Stansfield Turner, President Carter's CIA director, who famously brought in with him a group of Navy officers in 1977. DCI John Deutch and Porter Goss also used this counterproductive approach.

As secretary of defense, Gates found often found that he had less freedom of action than he did as DCI. Massively frustrated by the posturing of certain members of Congress, he seems to have resorted to the therapy of snide thought balloons while never—or hardly ever—voicing what he was really thinking. (53–82) Of those who criticized certain intelligence methods in the war

on terror—namely CIA's rendition and interrogation programs—Gates suggests that they forgot the "fear and urgency" of the immediate post-9/11 environment. At the same time, he is critical of the Bush administration for not conducting a "top to bottom review" of CIA's methods once the security situation stabilized because such methods, he says, "were most at odds with our traditions, culture, and history." (93–94).

The specter of intelligence failures clearly shaped Gates's thinking as secretary of defense. It was "a significant failure on the part of US intelligence agencies" that North Korea's construction of a nuclear reactor in Syria was something the United States learned from the Israelis in 2007—so much so that Gates is surprised neither the White House nor the Congress made an issue of it. (171) He distrusted as mere "gut instinct" the high "confidence levels" CIA analysts expressed about the presence of Bin Ladin at the Abbottabad compound and initially opposed the raid option in part because of the failure of the 1980 hostage rescue mission in Iran. (538–46)

Regarding present-day policy on Iran, Gates recalls that the Iran-Contra affair had scuttled his first nomination for DCI: "I had learned to be very cautious in dealing with Iran." (179) He has particularly harsh words for the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that said Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program. At the time it was published, the Bush administration was trying to get other countries to take the issue seriously. This was, Gates says, "a self-inflicted, grievous blow" to the US policy of trying to restrain Iran's nuclear program: "In my entire career in intelligence, I believe no single estimate did more harm to US security efforts and diplomatic efforts." (185–86)

Many reviewers of this book have highlighted Gates's candid observations about senior White House officials. What has gone without remark, however, are Gates's contrasting views about two very senior intelligence officials. Despite his lack of experience in intelligence, Leon Panetta was a welcome appointment to head the CIA, Gates says, because Panetta had run large government organizations, was politically savvy, respected the intelligence professionals at CIA, displayed "wisdom and common sense," and above all knew Congress—"a perennial deficiency at CIA." (293) Gates thought so highly of Panetta that he recommended him as his successor at the Pentagon. (431)

Gates describes retired Admiral Dennis Blair, by contrast, as unsuited for the position of Director of National Intelligence even though he had been a Rhodes scholar and a major combatant commander: "[Blair] actually believed that he was the boss of the US intelligence community [even though] the DNI still did not have the statutory basis or political clout to assert complete authority over others in the intelligence community." The DNI position requires persuasive skills, Gates says, and "Denny wasn't much into persuasion." Blair was "crazy" for making a "frontal assault" on CIA's prerogatives in choosing senior intelligence representatives abroad, a battle he lost to the more influential (and better liked) Panetta; moreover, Blair's style in meetings was too forceful and imperious to win allies at the White House. Eventually, Blair was forced out as DNI, with the final straw, in Gates's opinion, being his unilateral attempt to forge a "no-spy" agreement with France, an idea that had no administration support "and frankly was considered kind of bizarre." (293–94, 429)

If there is a shortcoming in this book, at least for intelligence officers, it is Gates's failure to explain how intelligence informed him (or failed him) on a day-to-day basis. He notes the "deep dives" CIA analysts provided President Bush, (94) and he gives full credit to "the extraordinary analysts at CIA" whose "painstaking" work found Bin Ladin—though at the time he thought the entire case was circumstantial and "we were risking the war in Afghanistan on a crapshoot." (538–40). Gates singles out US intelligence on Afghanistan as inadequate, (478) and at one point he expresses frustration that Washington-based analysis diverged from field assessments—though he thinks the analysis in Washington was probably better. Mostly, he believes that intelligence analysts are typically pessimistic and too ready to offer analysis that undermines policy. (208)

Other than offering a few complaints and kudos, Gates does not treat intelligence as part of his routine as a senior policymaker, which is a little odd, given his background as an analyst and intelligence officer supporting senior policymakers. Gates always writes eloquently and with deep knowledge about every foreign defense and security situation he confronts—how did he get so smart on so many topics? He may well be his own best teacher, but even so, I expected to hear something about how he kept himself up-to-date with intelligence and how well it served him.

As with his earlier memoir, Gates reveals much about himself in this present work. He admits to failures, frequently wonders whether he should have quit (his devotion to the troops kept him at it), and often expresses doubts about his own judgment and decisions. In explaining to Congress why he wanted gradual implementation of a major personnel policy change at Defense, Gates recounts that he had experience leading three large organizations: CIA, Texas A&M (he was university president), and DoD, and he had learned something:

> *I had managed change before. I had done it smart, and I had done it stupid. I had done it stupid, early in my career at CIA, by trying to impose significant change by edict from the top.*

At one time at CIA, Gates was considered a profoundly controversial, even polarizing figure. Many old-timers may still dislike him for past perceived sins; for some younger CIA officers, he might be a statesman or even a hero; and for others, he was very bright and very fortunate. On one of his final trips abroad as secretary of defense, Gates visited Russia in March 2011 and reflected:

> *I thought about the remarkable path I had followed during the forty-three years since I began work as a junior Soviet analyst at CIA two days before the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia.*

All might agree that Robert Gates has written a lively, detailed, heartfelt, engaging book that describes the last chapter of an extraordinary career that began with intelligence and ends with his identification with and devotion to America's uniformed protectors. He has even charted his final journey in the book's final paragraph:

> *I am eligible to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. I have asked to be buried in Section 60, where so many of the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan have been laid to rest. The greatest honor possible would be to rest among my heroes for all eternity.*

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